

An exchange with

## Don Henley

**Don Henley is the Grammy Award-winning cofounder of The Eagles and the founder of the Walden Woods Project.**

*How did you get involved with the legacy of Henry David Thoreau?*

In the late 1960s I was struggling to come to terms with my father's illness. He had been stricken by heart disease, which eventually took his life when I was 25. Encouraged by professors at the University of North Texas, I read some Thoreau and Emerson. Transcendental thought, as expressed by these two great American writers, influenced my life in a very fundamental way. It helped me cope but also prompted me to think about our relationship to the world around us and guided me toward a lifelong interest in historic preservation and conservation.

Like most people, I believed that Thoreau's Walden Woods in Concord and Lincoln, Mass., was protected by the state or federal government, but only the pond and the forest immediately surrounding it is in a state park. More than 2,000 acres of Walden Woods lie outside. In the fall of 1989 I saw a news story about two Thoreau scholars who had formed a grassroots organization to prevent two large commercial projects from being built within the woods. I telephoned to offer assistance and flew to Boston, where I saw the magnitude of the challenge. To build public awareness I founded the Walden Woods Project with the support of many other dedicated preservationists in 1990.



*Why is saving Walden Woods important?*

The pond and the woods that inspired the writing of *Walden* are historically significant not only because they were the setting for a great American classic, but also because Walden Woods was Henry David Thoreau's living laboratory, where he formulated his theory of forest succession, a precursor to contemporary ecological science. Many people refer to Walden Woods as the birthplace of the American conservation movement because it was there that Thoreau called for us to set aside land in its natural state, an impulse that would later lead to the creation of our national parks. If we can't protect the place where the idea of land conservation was so early asserted, how can we hope to save other places of historical and environmental significance?

*What is the status of the Walden Woods Project today?*

It has protected nearly 140 acres of land surrounding

Walden Pond. About 65 percent of Walden Woods' 2,680 acres is now permanently in conservation, but other historically significant and environmentally sensitive tracts are in urgent need of protection. The immediate objective is to restore a 35-acre closed landfill near Walden Pond and acquire agricultural land in Walden Woods about to come on the market. The headquarters of the Walden Woods Project is a historic building that is an official Save America's Treasures project, a 1905 English Tudor house built by Boston philanthropist Henry Lee Higginson, founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

*Are you a preservationist or an environmentalist?*

I'm both. After all, our historic landmarks are a part of our environment.

*Which is more threatened?*

Since millions of acres of land are paved over each year, one could effectively argue that the natural environment faces the greater threat. Yet at the same time, urban sprawl continues its relentless digestion of our open spaces and eats away at our historic buildings and landmarks. This threat is compounded by the fact that much of our historic built environment has fallen into a severe state of disrepair.

*Are there other common interests?*

Environmentalists and preservationists share a common goal—the preservation of the “common wealth,” the natural and built treasures that define us as Americans. Whether they be historic buildings, cultural landscapes, national landmarks, urban or national parks, wilderness areas, or coastlines, the same threats loom large—a lack of funding for preservation, unbridled urban sprawl, and the increasing pressures exerted on dwindling resources by population growth. In recent years, far too much of our commonwealth has been sold off or given away to special interests.

*What would Thoreau make of America today?*

Trying to predict what he would think about anything is risky, but I believe he'd be immeasurably pleased that our nation has set aside large tracts of land as national parks, national forests, and wildlife refuges. I think he'd be disappointed to learn that we are not doing more to protect what little remains of our wilderness areas and open spaces. He'd also take pleasure in our efforts to preserve our historic buildings, our artifacts, and the symbols of our cultural heritage but would chastise us for not doing more.

Thoreau would bemoan the fact that we have become a nation driven by consumption, alienated from the joys of simplicity that he expounded upon. I expect he would scold us for enslaving ourselves to our PCs, PDAs, and big-screen TVs and urge us to get outside. □